




12-8-2018

## Reading in the Mirror and Advancing the Proliferation of Photovoice: A Book Review

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### Recommended APA Citation

Latz, A. (2018). Reading in the Mirror and Advancing the Proliferation of Photovoice: A Book Review. *The Qualitative Report*, 23(12), 2989-2991. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2018.3894>

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## Reading in the Mirror and Advancing the Proliferation of Photovoice: A Book Review

### Abstract

Within her recent book, Michele Jarldorn (2018) advances the methodological literature on photovoice. As someone who has also written a book on the photovoice methodology (Latz, 2017), reading this book felt like home to me. It also felt like looking—or reading—in the mirror. I approached the book joyfully, excitedly, and closely. Asserting that radical social work and photovoice have complementary aims, Jarldorn presents a practical and pragmatic look at photovoice in action. Readers across the globe and from any disciplinary background will find this new text rich with nuanced, experience-based, and useful content.

### Keywords

Photovoice, Social Work, Participatory Action Research, Feminism

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## Reading in the Mirror and Advancing the Proliferation of Photovoice: A Book Review

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*Within her recent book, Michele Jarldorn (2018) advances the methodological literature on photovoice. As someone who has also written a book on the photovoice methodology (Latz, 2017), reading this book felt like home to me. It also felt like looking—or reading—in the mirror. I approached the book joyfully, excitedly, and closely. Asserting that radical social work and photovoice have complementary aims, Jarldorn presents a practical and pragmatic look at photovoice in action. Readers across the globe and from any disciplinary background will find this new text rich with nuanced, experience-based, and useful content. Keywords: Photovoice, Social Work, Participatory Action Research, Feminism*

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Reading Jarldorn's (2018) book felt like home. For the last decade, I have been working with the photovoice methodology. Seeing the recent proliferation of books focused on the use of photovoice within myriad contexts, or disciplines, such as youth studies (Delgado, 2015), education (Latz, 2017), and social work (Jarldorn, 2018) is invigorating. Along with other research approaches that center participants' perspectives and meaning making, leverage the visual, and focus on policy changes in the name of equity and liberation, photovoice has long been relegated to the margins of what counts as intellectually dense, rigorous, and field-advancing qualitative study. It seems now, however, that photovoice is moving inward—toward the center—and away from the margins of what is considered good qualitative inquiry. Or better yet, perhaps it is being subsumed by an expanding center. Let us assume the latter.

Not long ago, I wrote a book on the photovoice methodology (see Latz, 2017). Reading Jarldorn's (2018) work was an exercise in looking in the mirror. Having intimate knowledge of photovoice and a large stake in perpetuating its use, I read with heightened anticipation, excitement, and criticality. I was not disappointed. Jarldorn makes a compelling case for the complementary nature of radical social work and photovoice, noting the ways in which each pushes against the ubiquitous norms of the present global neoliberal moment. Situated in the national context of Australia, she expertly blends her social work experience, command of the photovoice literature, and use of photovoice with formerly incarcerated persons, which was the focus of her doctoral thesis. In what follows, I present an overview of Jarldorn's book, noting its numerous strengths and very few shortcomings. It should be noted here that this is a book worth reading—and using. My endorsement of this text is, in fact, unequivocal.

My study of this book yielded copious notes, totaling 2558 words—just some of which are used herein, along with numerous hours spent thinking about photovoice and what the text taught me about it. The book contains six chapters and a hefty set of appendices. Each chapter is preceded by an abstract and list of key words. A list of "Useful Resources" concludes each chapter and is followed by a references list for that discrete chapter. The appendices contain templates helpful to the enactment of photovoice procedures such as consent and photography release forms, exhibition press release, and participant handbook.

Within chapter one, Jarldorn (2018) argues that photovoice and the tenets of radical social work are complementary—all while recognizing the "constraints of neoliberal times" (p. 1). Throughout the chapter, she defines and explains radical social work, which is grounded in

Marxist notions of the primacy of class-based oppression. Neoliberalism leads many to assume radical social work is nothing but an idea, however, without any practical applicability. And many social workers are among them. As such, we might consider this book a call to action. Jarldorn closes the chapter by discussing participatory action research, photovoice, and photography. Her treatment of photovoice within this first chapter is rather scant. I was surprised to see no mention of participatory documentary photography (e.g., the work of Wendy Ewald and Jim Hubbard) here, although she does discuss Jo Spence's work at length.

Jarldorn (2018) lays out the theories that underpin photovoice next, through chapter two. She attends to Freirian education, including feminist critiques of Friere's work, and provides a rather thorough treatment of feminist theory, aptly giving intersectional feminism a front seat, which critiques White, middle-class notions of feminism. She then notes that those closest to the issues at hand are the experts, which gives way to discussion on whose voices/lens/knowledges are privileged within traditional research and social work practice. This foundation, then, serves as a mechanism to show how photovoice upends traditional research approaches and power dynamics. It remains a radical methodology—one that can lead to substantive change and increased critical consciousness and personal growth among participants. Jarldorn does well to address how photovoice affects those who engage in it. This is under-theorized and under-researched in the literature. Again, however, we see a lack of attention to participatory documentary photography in this chapter.

Chapter three is about “the practicalities and skills required to design, implement and facilitate a [p]hotovoice project” (Jarldorn, 2018, p. 48). Some of these skills include grant writing, negotiating, budgeting, evaluating, and facilitating. Careful planning is key; photovoice is just as much about the process as it is about the outcome. Power and solidarity are subtly addressed at the close of the chapter. The helpful metaphors vertical and horizontal space (see Hallahan, 2010) are used as a way to illustrate how the photovoice researcher can be a conduit between disparate groups connected to any given issue. The social worker/photovoice researcher ought to be trusted by those in power (vertical space) and those with whom they (singular they) are working (horizontal space). The “exhibition . . . is where the social worker can bring these two worlds together” (Jarldorn, 2018, p. 60).

Chapter four is focused on procedures and analyses. Jarldorn (2018) starts with an emphasis on power—and how it is naïve to think that participation in a photovoice project will “liberate people from systematic oppression” (p. 64). Researchers can walk away; participants cannot. She explains effective strategies for image discussion, narration, and analysis and notes that data creation can take place in multiple ways, including both focus groups and individual interviews. Two cases studies are used toward the end of the chapter to “demonstat[e] how theory and action combine in community photovoice projects” (p. 69). These two case studies were extremely effective in showing the effects photovoice can have on participants. Process-based outcomes of such projects are often left unreported and under-researched in most published photovoice research. These cases include verbatim commentary, or reflections, on the process of *doing* photovoice from participants in two different projects. The process is clearly transformative for participants in many ways.

The process is as valuable as the outcome; this is clear within chapter five. According to Jarldorn (2018), “[t]he relationship between ethics, feminist participatory research and radical social work is a contested space that merits further discussion” (p. 80). Photovoice invites ethical dilemmas. Jarldorn noted that “[p]hotovoice projects and other feminist, participatory and visual research methods have many stages and practices that bring further complexities in terms of ethics” (p. 81) as compared to most other kinds of research projects. Ethical dilemmas are nearly inevitable; however, “[i]t is the *ways* of working through ethical issues that are most important” (p. 81, italics in original). Furthermore, “[c]omplexities and messiness are part and parcel of any group project based in the community and should not be

considered a deficiency” (p. 81). A sizable portion of the chapter is dedicated to outlining the history of unethical practices within research (e.g., Tuskegee Study, Stanford Prison Experiment). This foundational information is used to underscore where IRBs/REBs came from, yet I found it unnecessary. Five areas of potential ethical concern are outlined (e.g., ownership of images and the politics of speaking for others). It is emphasized that a researcher/facilitator can be as prepared as possible and still encounter thorny ethical dilemmas throughout the project.

The final chapter is focused on Jarldorn’s (2018) work with 12 formerly incarcerated persons in South Australia. The data were both deeply personal and shared across participants. Part of this chapter is dedicated to Jarldorn’s personal-professional growth. At the start of the chapter, she builds a lovely story arc related to how she came to be interested in this topic. This was one of the most captivating passages of the book—likely because it was so personal. Readers will enjoy learning from Jarldorn’s personal experiences. Ample detail on the resultant exhibition and the ways in which attendees could provide feedback on the work was given.

In summary, this book is marvelous to think with, and I encourage any veteran or aspirant photovoice researcher to consider the wise words Jarldorn (2018) offers in this brief, accessible, and pragmatic text. Readers will especially savor the last chapter, which contains Jarldorn’s more personal accounts of using photovoice as the vehicle for her doctoral thesis. Readers from across the globe and spanning many disciplinary specialties will find the book dense with practical advice. The methodological literature base on photovoice is growing, and Jarldorn’s work certainly has an important place.

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### Author Note

My review of this text was completely independent and voluntary; I was not contacted by the author or publisher. As a photovoice researcher, reading this text was truly enjoyable. A close study of the book and the writing of this review were exercises in service to the advancement of the photovoice methodology, something about which I am very passionate. I am an Associate Professor of Adult, Higher, and Community Education within the Department of Educational Leadership at Ball State University. Correspondence regarding this article can be addressed directly to: [aolatz@bsu.edu](mailto:aolatz@bsu.edu).

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### Article Citation

- Latz, A. O. (2018). Reading in the mirror and advancing the proliferation of photovoice: A book review. *The Qualitative Report*, 23(12), 2989-2991. Retrieved from <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol23/iss12/7>
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